



GOVERNMENT, IMPERIALISM AND NATIONALISM IN CHINA

The Maritime Customs Service and its Chinese staff

Chihyun Chang

ROUTLEDGE 

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The Chinese Maritime Customs Service, which was led by British staff, is often seen as one of the key agents of Western imperialism in China; the customs revenue being one of the major sources of Chinese government income, but a source much of which was pledged to Western banks as the collateral for, and interest payments on, massive loans. This book, however, based on extensive original research, considers the lower level staff of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, and shows how the Chinese government, struggling to master Western expertise in many areas, pursued a deliberate policy of encouraging lower level staff to learn from their Western superiors with a view to eventually supplanting them – a policy which was successfully carried out. The book thereby demonstrates that Chinese engagement with Western imperialists was in fact an essential part of Chinese national state-building, and that what looked like a key branch of Chinese government delegated to foreigners was in fact very much under Chinese government control.

Chihyun Chang is a Post-doctoral Research Fellow in the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Taiwan.

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For my parents

Mark my words, in fifty years' time – I'll not live to see it – you foreigners
will be as anxious to stop our learning as you now are to hurry us into it!
Guaerjia Wenxiang (1818–76), January 1867

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Introduction

From the 1850s the old Middle Kingdom underwent many crises – prosperous southern China was occupied by the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom for 13 years, and the empire’s heartland was at stake as Emperor Xianfeng abandoned his capital city and the Summer Palace was razed by Anglo-French forces. In addition, *Nian* bandits harassed northern China and Muslim uprisings broke out in the Southwest and the Northwest. Of all these large-scale rebellions, a minor incident consequently led to a major historic event. In 1853 in Shanghai, because of the revolt of the *Xiaodaohui* (Dagger Society, a Triad secret society), France, Britain and America successfully protected their trade interests by transferring the responsibility of Customs administration to foreigners. The Inspectorate was thus established under the supervision of the three foreign powers’ Inspectors. The Inspectorate can be seen as a temporary solution to a local rebellion, but it lasted for 96 years and became the most efficient and effective service of the Chinese government.

The Qing government, surprisingly, muddled through these crises and lasted for another half-century. A group of Manchu officials in the central government and Chinese provincial authorities began a series of westernising reforms in order to save this collapsing empire. These projects of westernisation were closely related to the Inspectorate, the Inspector-General (IG, its head), and the Chinese Maritime Customs Service (CMCS). Robert Hart was appointed the second IG in 1863 and held this post until 1911.¹ When this 73-year-old man applied for long leave in 1908 to go back to the UK, the Qing government still allowed him to keep his title and his full salary until he died in 1911. His loyal service made him the most powerful foreigner in China and one of the most powerful officials in the imperial government.

Although it was designed as a revenue collecting institution, the responsibilities of the CMCS, in Hart’s hands, went far beyond Customs administration, such as the building up of the Chinese postal service with its far-flung activities in the public weal; the establishment of the Marine Department to secure navigation – lighthouses, wireless signal stations, buoys and beacons located at every corner along the Chinese coastline and rivers; the setting up of the Statistical Department for the compiling and publishing of China’s trade statistics, which today are still

2 Introduction

the most precise and reliable quantitative data for researching the economic history of modern China.

The other numerous activities were the setting up of western education through the Tongwenguan (the Interpreter School), the helping to establish and to sustain China's diplomatic and consular service, the supervising of quarantine and port sanitary measures in the days when there was no local or national organisation for the purpose, the organising and managing of the exhibits of China's arts and industries for international exhibitions, and the stewardship of foreign and domestic obligations secured on the Customs revenues.

Over 11,000 foreign nationals served in the CMCS between 1854 and 1950 and were delegated to administer these responsibilities. Another 11,000 Chinese were employed in clerical and physical jobs. The foreign staff had significant international influence and real administrative power at the highest level, constantly shaping the course of the Chinese state at key moments. While it was accelerating China's formation of a more efficient government, the foreign staff constricted her autonomy. Negative feelings against the Inspectorate stemmed from this 'foreignness', which was usually labelled 'imperialist' or 'colonial'.

Due to the complicated nature and sophisticated responsibilities of the CMCS, historians in different generations and regions have a wide range of understandings towards its role in modern Chinese history. They began to research the CMCS from the beginning of the twentieth century, and the industry of historical knowledge has been filled with controversial interpretations of the CMCS.

A historiographical review of CMCS history

The first volume of *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire*, published in 1910, set off the studies of CMCS history in the western academic world. In more than a century of the studies of CMCS history, there are three phases – 1910 to 1949, 1950 to the 1990s and 1990s to the present – and non-academic factors constantly influenced the historiography of the CMCS, such as politics, nationalism, methodology and ideology. The best way to filter the data is through a complete understanding of the whole period of the historiography of CMCS history. This explains why some issues were raised particularly.

The writings of CMCS history and modern Chinese history have been closely related since the three-volume *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire* (1910–18) was published. The author, Hosea Ballou Morse, had directed the Statistical Department of the CMCS. As the Department was put in charge of the library of the CMCS, and the publishing of the Returns of Trade and Reports on Trade,² the Statistical Secretary controlled most of the documents in relation to China's foreign relations, finance and economy from 1859 to 1948.

The second and third volumes of *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire* narrates modern China's diplomatic history based on the history of the CMCS directed by the 'central figure' of Robert Hart, because the CMCS 'did much more than collect the customs revenue, and at a very early date in its history the Chinese government showed that it estimated rightly the great value of the